

## History, fiction and extended memory: a response to Inga Clendinnen<sup>1</sup>

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In a recent *Quarterly essay* (Clendinnen, 2007), Inga Clendinnen looks at different aspects of the “history wars” which she sums up as the debate on “the history question: who owns the past?” In her opening section she explores John Howard’s quest for a simple and celebratory narrative of the development of Australian values through the great national themes. Anzac Day, Waltzing Matilda and other legends coded into the culture lie at the core of Howard’s enterprise.

She moves on from this to look at fiction and its relationship to history as we more normally understand it. In its own way, this is another round of the history wars along with the question of history’s utility in the promotion of different brands of politics, but the issues it raises have to do not so much with the interpretation of the past, as with a comparison of fiction and history as competing methods for its exploration.

Clendinnen quotes the novelist Kate Grenville, author of *The secret river* (2005), on the place of fiction in the history wars, noting her sense of herself as “up on a stepladder, looking down on the historians battling away below

about the details of exactly where and when and how many and how much, and they’ve got themselves into these polarized positions... but a novelist can stand up on a step ladder and look down at this, outside the fray, and say there is another way to understand it. You can set two sides against each other and ask which side will win... or you can go up on the step ladder and look down and say, well, nobody is going to win.  
(Clendinnen 2007:19)

She goes on to quote Grenville’s belief in the power of imagination and empathy in historical comprehension:

Once you can actually get inside the experience, it’s no longer a matter of who’s going to win, it’s simply a matter of yes, now I understand both sides.

As Grenville sees it,

The historians are doing their thing, but let me as a novelist come to it in a different way, which is the way of empathising and imaginative understanding of those difficult events. (Clendinnen 2007:20)

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And her way of doing that would be

Basically to think, well, what would I have done in that situation, and what sort of a person would that make me? (Clendinnen 2007:20)

Clendinnen goes on to quote David Malouf making a similar point, about fiction's value in mediating the past through imagination:

Our only way of grasping our history – and by history I really mean what has happened to us, and what determines what we are now and where we are now – the only way of really coming to terms with that is by people's entering into it in their imagination, not by the world of facts, but by being there. And the only thing really which puts you there in that kind of way is fiction ... It's when you have actually been there and become a character again in that world...(Clendinnen 2007:21)

Clendinnen's response to both is that this is impossible:

We cannot post ourselves back in time. People really did think differently then – or at least we must proceed on that assumption. “The inhabitants of the past “can be relied on to affront our expectations.

For her the past is, as David Lowenthal famously called it, “a foreign country” (Lowenthal 1988), in which people often behave in ways which are unaccountable to modern sensibility. From her own research, for example, she asks how we should empathise with the Aztecs, who tenderly welcomed the birth of boys while celebrating them as candidates for the killing-stone (Clendinnen 2007:22).

She also notes that historians, compared with novelists, have the extra difficulty of arriving at a definitive account. As she sees it, epistemological problems always deprive historians of the certainty of novelists, since historians are dependent on evidence which is always problematic. Their accounts of the past are therefore always provisional.

Clendinnen's discussion is about the competing claims of historians and novelists to describe and evoke historical events. Her points are largely to do with the deficiencies of fiction in approaching historical material. But history and fiction are both literary forms, and it is worth at least noting that the boot has sometimes been on the other foot. Up to a point, this discussion is reminiscent of the debate over Manning Clark's *A history of Australia*. Clark described this as his grand effort “to write history as a story - history as an art. In *The tree of man*,” he wrote,

Patrick White had just shown it was possible to discuss the themes that interested me in a novel. That was an inspiration to start - to show that a historian could do it. (Bridge 1992:19)

Predictably enough, in the debate on Clark's work, there were some (like Clark's own publisher Peter Ryan and historians Mark Ellis and John Hirst) who saw the exercise as a retreat from scholarly rigour, and others, like the literary critic Peter Craven, who applauded Clark's use of his literary imagination to energise his account of the Australian past. "How did Stephen Crane", Craven asked,

who never fought in a battle, write one of the greatest representations of one? How did Gibbon proceed to write history? Having informed themselves as best they could, they imagined it. (Bridge 1992:177)

In similar vein, Clendinnen describes the novelist Peter Carey, questioned about how he justified his account of different events in his novel *The true history of the Kelly gang* – sinking further and further into his chair and saying, "I made it up":

"His interrogators", Clendinnen observes,

were insisting he had written history. He knew he had written fiction. Carey, whose inventive powers are uninhibited, who aims at transformation, not replication of the past or reformation of the present... put the matter crisply back in 1997: 'It doesn't matter what is out in the real world; this is art and you are making it suit your needs'. (Clendinnen 2007: 32)

In the end, Clendinnen's adjudication between history and fiction's rival claims to "own the past" appears ambivalent, if only because of the problems posed by imagining into some historical cultures, like those of the Aztecs, the Huron Indians, or the Llongot head-takers, studied by the American anthropologist Michelle Rosaldo who

tentatively reconstructs the sequence of emotions experienced by triumphant head-takers.... Physically she was 'there'... But she knew she could not intuit what was in their minds. For that she needed long observation, cool thought and the constant awareness that her own intuitions could be of no use at all. (Clendinnen 2007: 23)

And yet this is at odds with Clendinnen's own quite passionate efforts to achieve just this kind of empathy, as in her work on the Aztecs, in which she strove, as she says

to make them humanly intelligible: to penetrate the barrier of what seems to be inexplicable behaviour. I wanted to penetrate their painful docility in face of religious obligation: their self-torture, the brutalities routinely

inflicted on themselves and each other, and the even more extreme brutalities inflicted on outsiders in the ritualised killing of men, women, children, infants (Clendinnen 2001).

And she acknowledges her pleasure in seeing “the most assured historians reveal their moral passion”, interrogating their sources to give us a “fleeting sense of what it would have been like to have lived a different life, in a different place, at a different time.” (Clendinnen 2006:55).

And this perhaps is the point. Good history depends on its grounding in its sources, while a fictional world has only to be credible in its own terms – in fiction the tale’s the thing. A recent newspaper interview of the novelist John Boyne, author of *The boy in the striped pyjamas*, about the friendship between a child inmate of a Nazi concentration camp and the son of the commandant, notes his sense of his responsibilities to history as “not to tell blatant lies” (Steger 2007). Short of this, a novelist can therefore take liberties with the sources, and this is not a fatal flaw in the work of fiction, since a work of fiction is primarily about the world created in it, not about the accuracy of its relationship to any world external to it. The work of history, on the other hand, has to grow from its sources.

But historians are also the chroniclers of the tribe, and their work, as well as being grounded in the sources, needs to resonate in the culture if it is to have cultural force. Historians construct our past, so that in progressing back through time beyond personal memory, we have an understanding of past events which informs our sense of who we are and the nature of our shared historical experience. In this way, historians create our extended memory, the memory shared across our culture about its evolution and the values that have been enacted in its past and shape its present.

The meeting ground here is memory. Memory is the historical information people carry about in their heads from their own experience (personal or collective) – it enables them to define their own world view against others and place themselves in temporal context, and its relationship to history is complex. David Blight has distinguished neatly between the two:

If history is shared and secular, memory is often treated as a sacred set of absolute meanings and stories, possessed as the heritage or identity of a community. Memory is often owned, history interpreted. Memory is passed down through generations; history is revised. Memory often coalesces in objects, sites, and monuments; history seeks to understand contexts in all their complexity. History asserts the authority of academic training and canons of evidence; memory carries the often more immediate authority of community membership and experience (Blight 2002:44).

Memory is built into, even defines, a culture, while the meanings flowing from history are as various as the questions asked of it. History is contested space;

memory is shared. In recognizing this, it might tempt historians to abandon the field, and accept that history is something for specialists. My suggestion, however, is that it is precisely in their ability to shape memory by embedding into it an informed understanding of the past that goes beyond the personal memory of individuals that historians earn their place in the culture.

This is not to discount the polarities noted by Blight – history is indeed provisional, and memory’s force lies in its continuity over time through the evolution of the culture it helps to shape. But the force of memory has much to do with “remembered” experience. Australians are familiar with this through the annual reiterations of the experience of combat on the Western Front or Gallipoli each Anzac Day. By contrast, issues of explanation are not a great feature of Anzac Day compared to the re-enactment of experience through oral history, film and other evocative media.

The point in this is that historical explanation – where it serves to shape popular memory - is also about the evaluation of experience. As well as determining the accuracy of accounts of past events (Grenville’s “exactly where and when and how many and how much”), historical explanation is about the nature of past experience, which in its own way helps to determine the importance of the subject under discussion for our culture, by, as David Malouf claims of fiction, “people’s entering into it in their imagination”. For many people, for example, it is the quality of experience in the First World War which forms part of their contemporary consciousness, rather than questions of causation or outcome, so that for historians to shape this consciousness, the quality of historical experience needs to become part of their account, for which they are just as accountable as for their analysis of “exactly where and when and how many and how much”.

As I have noted, history and fiction are both forms of literary writing, but a work of fiction is assessed in its own terms, through the nature of the sensibility demonstrated in it, the conviction carried by the world it creates. Historians likewise as writers demonstrate their own sensibilities which help to create the significance of their works as pieces of writing, though not necessarily of explanation. It is, for example, part of the charm of Simon Schama’s excellent *Rough crossings: Britain, the slaves and the American Revolution*, that he can write of one of his characters at a particularly difficult point in his life, that “getting himself hanged was just the start of Benjamin Whitecuffe’s problems” (Schama 2005:209). This, it seems to me, is authorial wit rather than the evocation of historical experience. On the other hand, the prose in his account of how the freed slave David finds his salvation and an end to his sufferings in the church at Silver Bluffs in South Carolina, while not original to David, is a moving evocation of David’s experience and adds powerful meaning and significance to the account:

A church was built at Silver Bluffs, and David and the rest took the Lord's Supper and sang the hymns of blessed Isaac Watts, and as the spirit crept on him, so others saw it and asked him to preach. Ashamed because he was a stammerer and unlettered, he turned away from the task until Brother Palmer told him not to be a Jonah lest he offend the Lord, and so it was that he became Brother David and an Elder and began to speak to the people at Silver Bluffs and have them turn their faces to the shining countenance of the all-forgiving God (Schama 2005:119).

As we have seen, the contest between history and fiction on "who owns the past" is not really an issue, since truth to the sources is not integral to historical fiction. And while we may, as Clendinnen suggests, have difficulty empathizing with the Aztecs and their ritualized murder of children, we can also applaud her sense of the power of the historian to give us a "fleeting sense of what it would have been like to have lived a different life, in a different place, at a different time." It therefore remains true that much of the significance of history in our culture lies in its capacity to inform memory by telling us about the nature of past experience. It may be difficult to fit this into the normal run of historical debate (though a greater emphasis on textual criticism in historical discussion may be helpful), but it is still crucial to the role of history in our culture that historians, from their understanding of their sources, do what they can to tell us not only what happened in the past, but what it was like.

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